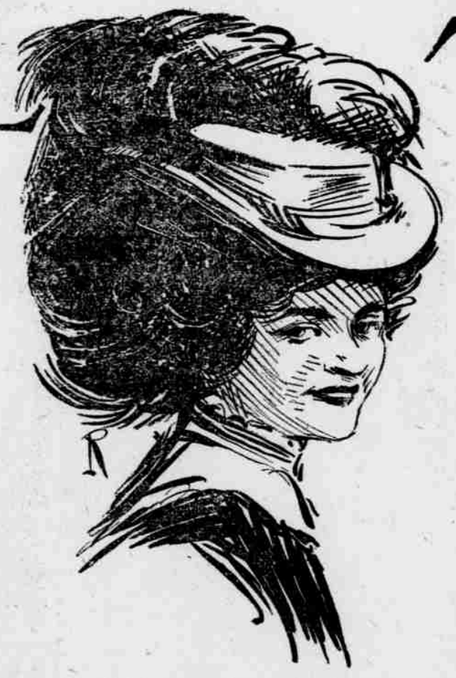
OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

The REAL THING

BY GUY BOLTON



ANOTHER long moment of sickening hesitation, then a crashing report, and Clough Hagan fell forward across the table, the smoking revolver barrel trailing from his limp clasp upon the floor.

It was an uncomfortable position and he must have been glad to get up and stretch himself. True to his artistic principles, he had let the curtain rise and fall three times without moving, certain that this East Side audience he knew so well would stay on at the end to pay his achievement the tribute of a "call."

In his dressing room a few minutes later I found him bending over a chipped bowl vigorously scrubbing and splashing.

"Hello, Sport," was his greeting. "How's the Press? Am I in for a roast?"

"Not from me," I answered. "I'm going to fill up the boxes for you by saying that Clough Hagan ought to be on Broadway—which is a lie—for you're simply made for this line. The swells like getting up parties to come over here."

"You make me sick. Why can't you say what you think? Was it a good show?"

"Not so much. But now you've got your hat on I don't mind telling you that Prince Louis couldn't have been better done by anyone."

Arrogant under censure, but shy before praise, Clough flushed and asked:

"What about the Jewel?"

"The Jewel was her own sweet self. She can never play any other part, and I for one never want her to."

"No; she's a swell little lady," he assented, but I was surprised at his thoughtful tone, for rumor had persistently asserted that Clough Hagan was about to marry his leading woman—a rumor that I, for one, welcomed joyously. She was a sweet exotic to have grown in this tainted atmosphere, for, unlike Clough, who had played more roles in life than he had in his six years with the Einstein Stock Company, the Jewel was born to the profession. The stage her nursery, her schoolroom, and her playground, had left her natural and unaffected, as unconscious of her slim girlish beauty as a child.

Einstein entered now unctuous and beaming, his pudgy, bejewelled hand extended to me.

"He's all right, ain't he?" he exultantly exclaimed, indicating the actor with a jerk of the thumb. "And we're going to get a swell bunch of notices. But say, the Madame and Miss Jewel are waiting for us. I've ordered a little lunch round at the joint—can't say 'no,' and remember the whole thing's strictly on me."

Clough paused in the act of turning the key in the lock. "I'm sorry, old man; I've got a date."

"Well, you just forget it again. I know it's all some bloomin' girl."

The young Irishman seized the phrase. "Yes, it's all some bloomin' girl," he said. "I'm sorry, old man—straight goods."

As we passed through the little knot outside the stage door, Clough offered his customary apology for the manager.

"He can't help being greasy, and he's white on the money end all right."

But I was not thinking of Einstein. "What's the matter with you and the Jewel?" I asked.

"Nothing the matter." Then before I could renew the attack he stepped into the street and swung aboard a passing car.

The next time I saw Clough Hagan was on a Sunday evening at a little Italian restaurant on the lower West Side. He was sitting with a girl in a corner of the high-fenced garden, a drooping acacia tree deepening the twilight shade above them.

When I joined them, Clough insisted on having another chair brought up and ordered more coffee.

"This is Miss Schwartz," he said. "She's just on from Milwaukee."

The lady's flaxen hair and slow, bovine smile betrayed her nationality more surely than did even her name and residence. In five minutes I was in possession of the facts that this was her first trip East; that she thought New York a nice place to visit, but one in which she wouldn't care to live; and that she was staying at the Waldorf with her mother. Then I turned to Clough with a question about the "show."

"Oh, it's taking all right," he responded, "but there's nothing in the business. Even Einstein hasn't raised the price of diamonds very far yet."

"Art is long and artists are usually 'short,'" I remarked. "After all, money isn't everything, is it, Miss Schwartz?"

"Why, I think it's a good deal," she replied.

On the way out Clough confided to me. "She's old Jake Schwartz's daughter, you know—the big cooperage people. They're just made of the real thing."

"And she's the only child?"

"Yes, she's the only child."

I parted from them on the sidewalk and strolled home balancing those huge quantities of the "real thing" against the Jewel's winsome red-lipped beauty and tender charm.

One morning soon after this I came down to breakfast and found a note from Clough Hagan lying by my plate. It asked me to be one of a box party he was giving on the opening night of the new play. "Miss Schwartz is to be there," he wrote, "and a Mr. Hudgins—my rival. I want you to come, too, and see he doesn't take a mean advantage of me in his criticism of my acting," and I saw from this frank disclosure of his intentions that matters must have advanced considerably farther since I had last seen him.

On the night in question I was the first to arrive and found Clough in his dressing room rolling back in a dilapidated Morris chair and blowing miniature clouds of cigarette smoke ceilingward.

His mood seemed perversely sordid and in his replies to my question about the company's plans he burst forth into a tirade on the profession.

"I tell you how it is," he concluded. "I don't give a hurrah in Halifax what the company does. I'll be on the other side of the footlights next year—that is, unless Hudgins has set his alarm clock earlier than mine."

"So you're in earnest?"

"Of course I'm in earnest—and Hudgins is, too, I can tell you. It's not all the sponduliks, either. She's a mighty nice girl."

"Yes," I said with the bare assent of politeness, "but after the Jewel——"

"I don't see why you all talk about the Jewel," he rejoined almost peevishly. "I never had a chance with her. She doesn't like me."

"Rubbish."

He sat up eagerly. "No, that's right, Freddie. She likes me in a way, I know, but she doesn't like to have me touch her. She has a physical aversion for me. Whenever there's a scene in which I have to make love to her, take her in my arms, or any of that sort of thing, she strains away from me as if touching me were positively painful to her."

I surveyed him pityingly, but my opportunity to explain was postponed by the arrival of the others under the pilotage of the kindly officious Einstein. Miss Schwartz, dazzling in white satin, introduced me to her companion, Miss Walters.

I got through the amiable preliminaries mechanically. Miss Walters, she informed me, was staying with the Schwartzes at the Waldorf.

As for Mr. Hudgins, I can merely state that he was a heavy blond young man with a broad back, and that he shaved the nape of his neck. I saw him, so to speak, in the reverse, and I cannot say whether this was more interesting than the side he turned so assiduously to Miss Schwartz.

We occupied the stage box and had scarcely disposed of the wraps when Miss Schwartz declared that she felt conspicuous—everybody seemed to be staring at her. She, therefore, changed to one of the seats farther back, while Miss Walters not to be outdone in an effort at genteel effacement, refused to take the vacant seat. Thus it was that, acting as a screen from the eyes of vulgar curiosity, I found myself nearest to the stage—a fact for which later I had occasion to be glad.

"Isn't she charming?" I said, turning to Miss Schwartz as the Jewel came again upon the scene.

"She looks well on the stage," the heiress assented judicially. "It's wonderful how well these actresses make up."

Throughout the play she showed the languid interest of true gentility, but when at the end the lover slipped his arms about the heroine and drew her hands from her face, I noticed that Miss Schwartz stirred restlessly and leaned forward in her seat.

Miss Walters raised a tightly gloved hand discreetly to her lips. "He makes love better than anyone I've ever seen—on the stage," she remarked.

Then as I turned my eyes back to the scene the Jewel suddenly slipped her arms about Clough's neck and pressed her cheek against his.

There flashed to my mind the memory of what Clough had said that evening, and seeing his bewildered, shamefaced gaze as he halted over his lines like a shy boy released from an unlooked-for embrace, I realized that what he had told me was true and that this willing contact had deeply affected him.

All that had come to him in that moment I was not to know till later, but something of it I must have guessed, for I felt no great surprise when Einstein came round to the box door just as we were leaving, and in his best curtain manner announced that Mr. Hagan was indisposed and would have to go straight home.

"Nothin' much the matter—just the excitement an' all. He was working extra hard," the manager added with an atrocious wink, "to make a good impression on two handsome young ladies in the audience."

When we reached the street, both the ladies seemed to be out of spirits, Miss Schwartz vetoing every suggestion as to where we should take supper, while Miss Walters replied that the places named had always been very nice whenever she was there. Altogether the remainder of the evening was not a success, and I was glad when, our duties discharged, I parted from Hudgins at the door of the hotel and walked up Fifth Avenue turning east on the street where Clough lived. Something had happened and I could not sleep without finding out what it was.

I half expected to have to wait, but the boy who swung open the heavy glass door marked "Bachelor Apartments" told me that Mr. Hagan had been home some time.

Clough arose from the lounge as I entered and answered literally my question as to how he was feeling.

"Pretty rocky, thanks, old man—but, say, I'm awfully sorry to have left that bunch on your hands."

"That's all right," I answered. "It's a good thing I was there. I kept Hudgins from stealing a base on you, I think."

"Stealing a base? He can cross the plate if he wants. I shan't stop him."

I did not speak, but waited for him to tell me what he meant. Instead, he turned to me with the invariable professional question:

"How's the show?"

"Not up to 'Prince Louis,' but I heard a lady say that you made love better than anyone she had ever seen."

"Oh, yes, I make love all right. I'm the swell thing in lovers—even if I have just been turned down."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the Jewel—I mean that I've been in love for Heaven knows how long—without even knowing it. I thought I wanted to marry money. But to-night when that little girl's arms twined suddenly about my neck in the last act, and I felt her lips flutter against mine, I knew then that I wanted her more than anything else in the world."

"And you told all this to the Jewel and she refused you?" I repeated incredulously.

"She said that I was deceiving myself—that I wasn't the man to struggle through life. I wanted money and all that it could do more than I knew. 'Don't pass by golden opportunity,' were her words, and there wasn't a hint of irony—that's what made it worse—just a reasoning patience, as though I were a kid wanting to take on something she knew I wasn't equal to."

"But she loves you."

He shook his head. "No, she doesn't, Freddie. She told me the sort of man she should love, and it was one very different from Clough Hagan. A fighter she wants—not a pug, but a man who won't lie down to a count, a man who stands by himself and keeps on to the end."

I could find no words to express either my surprise or sympathy, and we sat on a long time in silence. Only as I rose to go my mingled thoughts were gathered into one generalization:

"All women are strange, but some of them are wonderful," I said, and that observation recurred to me many times in the succeeding weeks, for though the drama had ended, the characters were still there, as if in a dreary sequel demanding the interest and affection of all friends.

When Clough came to me with the news that he had canceled his engagement for the next season so that—the theater being closed—he had now joined the ranks of the "has beens," I railed loudly against the pity of it.

And later when the stock company commenced their season without Clough, who had broken his contract, and, after changing the bill three times in as many weeks, offered Clough his old place at a big advance, I urged him to accept.

"You might as well ask me to have another try for Miss Schwartz," he said with a half smile. "But from all I hear my successor has given satisfaction there, and his contract's as good as signed."

So Einstein's offers and my persuasions failed alike. We could not get him to return to the stage. It took Jerry Mackintosh to do that—poor old Jerry who had been dead and gone six months or more, for about the middle of winter Clough ran into Jerry's little girl somewhere on the Bowery, and found out that her mother was sick and the family almost starving. He asked me to write an article, saw all of his old friends, and in less than a week the "Jerry Mackintosh Benefit" was advertised in the papers. Included in the bill was "the last act of 'Prince Louis' with Mr. Clough Hagan."

By simply closing my eyes I can see that last act of "Prince Louis" as it appeared from the wings with the rough board cleats on the back of the castle walls, and the hero at the top of the tower, dropping icy ironies with suave malignancy upon his wife and her lover.

I had just turned to speak to the stage carpenter when the accident happened. It was at the end of the second scene and the man had already moved over to the curtain. There was a heavy crash upon the stage and, turning, I saw the flimsy tower a mass of torn canvas and splintered framework on the floor, and Clough lying underneath it. As the curtain fell he raised himself on one arm and 'gave' his line.

"My ships are in sight, pure cursed fool," he cried, shaking his fist at his trapped enemy. Then the curtain dropped and I ran on, picked him up, and carried him to his dressing room.

"My leg is the worst," he groaned, his lip drawn between his teeth.

I felt it gingerly and he winced.

"I don't believe it's broken, but your ankle is most likely sprained," I said while I poured him out a glass of whisky. "The doctor is coming."

"I don't want the doctor yet. I'm going through that last scene," he replied.

"You certainly won't do any such thing."

"No," affirmed Einstein. "I'll step down front and explain. I wouldn't have you go on like that for a week's gate receipts."

Clough's answer was to swing his feet to the floor and with a hand on my shoulder he stumbled heavily around to the wings.

"You just come back to your room," I said authoritatively as he paused at the entrance, his face drawn, his breath coming in quick gasps.

"Not this time, Freddie. I'll show her I'm not always a quitter."

I understood, and I wouldn't have stopped him then if I had known—what I did know later.

I was standing where he left me when the curtain rose. Some one touched my arm.

"Why did you let him go?" The Jewel's eyes were accusing. "Have you no feeling? No heart?"

I laid my hand above hers and met her gaze steadily. "Yes," I said. "Have you?"

I could see the color mantel in her face under the rouge and powder, but she made no answer, and after a moment "took" her entrance. But though she delivered the lines faultlessly, she can hardly be said to have filled the part. The personality, the Jewel herself was not there. And Clough's fine acting stood out in marked contrast. As I watched him in turn, I noticed the beads of perspiration glistening on his face. He was suffering agony.

We watched while Clough did that splendid bit of silent acting at the end—listening, pistol in hand, to the long talk between the lovers. He never showed it all better—the shame as the husband learns his suspicions have been as unjust as his cruel revenge, and the battle between his desire to atone and the shrinking from death. When at last to our straining senses came the dull report of the shot that meant the end.

A few minutes later the doctor handed me a slip of paper.

"Send some one to the drug store with this, and tell the gentleman who diagnosed the sprain that he'd better stick to his own profession. Mr. Hagan has a fracture of the leg as well as one of the smaller bones of the foot."

I obeyed him. He met me outside the door upon my return and told me that he had not needed the prescription, after all. "I've got him fixed up and he'll get along all right. There'll be something here shortly to move him in."

As I started to go in on my return he detained me. "His fiancee is with him now and they asked to be alone."

"His fiancee."

"Yes, Miss Anderson, isn't it?"

"They won't mind me, I think." I turned the handle, then paused, smiling, as I viewed the transformation scene.

"Evidently broken bones haven't much to do with happiness," I observed as I took a hand of each.

The Jewel raised to mine eyes that were not ashamed of some happy tears. "Isn't he splendid?"

Clough's remark was no less illuminating.

"Say, Freddie, old man," he whispered proudly, "she's the real thing."